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ABSTRACT

This panel presentation reacts to "America's Choice" (a publication of the National Center on Education and the Economy), which addresses the preparedness of students to enter the work force. Recognizing the need of continual evaluation of education programs, the paper states that generalizing problems of other areas to rural schools is not appropriate. Rural schools provide education that is personalized, comprehensive, and successful. There has recently been a rebirth of occupational education programs to prepare students to enter either postsecondary education or the work force. Recently, New York State BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) Directors and academicians recommended that the concept of occupational education and its delivery be broadened and that a greater number of students should participate. In response to the Commission of America's Choice calls for Youth Centers and Combined Work and Study and College Programs, the paper recommends that New York State do the following: (1) develop and refine alternative education, occupational education, work study, and adult education programs; (2) combine advisory boards, councils, and networks within regions into one business/education council; (3) request that the Commissioner of Education initiate a compact that bridges the various departments in state government with the education community; and (4) include senior representatives from companies with national and international markets on any statewide advisory council that is formed. Business and education must work together to accomplish these goals. (KS)

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RURAL SCHOOLS PROGRAM

Panel Presentation: Onus on Everyone

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Cooperstown, NY

July 30, 1991

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning about a very exciting, well developed and thoughtful book, America's Choice. I have very specific reactions and recommendations that I will turn to in just a minute.

Let me begin by sharing with you my frame of reference which comes from numerous and varied experiences in education, and from the context of my current work with rural school districts in Northern New York.

We, as Board Members and School Administrators, have been bashed over the last decade for not turning out graduates who are viewed by leaders of business and industry as being ready to perform in the real world of work. For at least the last year, I have taken every opportunity - I urge you to do the same - to tell our side of the story.

First, we educate all of the children: Gifted, Regents, Vocational, Local Diploma Track, Mildly handicapped and Profoundly handicapped. We do so without the traditional help from home. Even though parents are interested in the well being of their children, they are often alone in the task of parenting and/or are overwhelmed with all of the pressures of work, home and family. Second, we educate all of the children in a system that has limited human and financial resources. Third, according to the benchmarks for success that we have been given over the years, our students do quite well.

Rural schools that I am familiar with deliver what I call personalized education. The school is truly an extension of the community. In most instances the teachers and staff know the students, their parents, and even the grandparents. Our buildings are typically open 18 hours a day, are safe environments, and are meeting places for many groups and agencies.

When we examine the success of our programs, in many of our districts we see that a greater number of students go on to college and the military, and that there is an upturn in the number completing vocational programs than in years past. Even though the drop-out rate across New York State is @ 35%, in

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many rural, upstate districts, the drop-out rate is between 0 and 5%. The statistics show that the number of students finishing high school in this generation in our districts has improved enormously.

Should we continue to examine what we do and set our sights higher? ABSOLUTELY! But we should not allow the demographers, business leaders, politicians and naysayers to lump all schools together either in the nation or the state as they post their sweeping generalizations.

America's Choice is one of the first books in the last decade to clearly, and in layman's terms, state the problems, integrate some new material, and make concrete recommendations. It is one of perhaps a very few that put some of the onus for improvement, and for continued economic growth of our nation on business and industry.

The National Center publication proposes a new structure to our educational system, especially at the middle, high school and post secondary levels. We must be reminded that as our authors pulled information together and reviewed various models across the nation and in other countries, they may have overlooked the comprehensiveness and flexibility of Boards of Cooperative Educational Services and the program offerings and proven track record of vocational centers in New York State.

Graduates of vocational programs demonstrate the qualities desired of workers that are stated in America's Choice, and implied in another proposal, Work Force 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century by William B. Johnston and Arnold H. Parker. One of the major, continuing goals of occupational ed programs has been to create in students an appropriate work ethic and positive attitude toward work. A major segment of most occ ed programs is a work experience out in local businesses. As America's Choice calls for school to work transitions, vocational centers can provide evidence of current practice and success.

I am not suggesting that vocational ed has gone far enough. To the contrary, we have much more to do in New York State. Since the years of the Regents' Action Plan, there has been somewhat of a rebirth of occ ed in many regions. The initiative came from a need to survive, but also, a basic conviction that many students were being shortchanged, and leaving high school without a plan for post secondary education or the skills necessary to become viable players in the world of work. A position statement of the Task Force on the Role of BOCES in providing occupational and continuing education entitled, "BOCES: A Resource For

Preparing New York's Work Force," was published in March 1989. In April of 1989 the Board of Regents accepted one of the Task Force's recommendations, and endorsed a statement that all recipients of a local or Regents' diploma should be prepared for immediate employment and/or post-secondary education. These were major initiatives at the State level that were picked up and developed in many regions.

BOCES Directors and academicians are now calling for a broader mission for occupational education. In a February 1991 issue of the Phi Delta Kappa Journal devoted to vocational education, Larry Rosenstock, a practitioner and lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in an article entitled, "The Walls Come Down: The overdue Re-unification of Vocational and Academic Education," says:

> "Pursuing integration with academic education requires us to adopt a different view: that vocational education is a different way to learn the same academic concepts and skills that non-occupational students learn."
>
> "Students engage in experiential and applied learning. They learn how to pose and solve problems, using the tools at hand or inventing new ones. They work cooperatively... (p. 435)."

In other words, occ ed should be re-oriented. Our concept of occ ed and its delivery should be broadened, and a greater number of students should participate.

Kenneth Gray, a professor at Pennsylvania State University, contributed to the same Phi Delta Kappa Journal an article entitled, "Vocational Education in High School: A Modern Phoenix?" in which he says:

> "Many of us in the field are proposing that the new mission for voc ed should involve a somewhat radical departure from the past by de-emphasizing preparation for full-time employment and emphasizing instead "tech/prep" - technical preparation for two-year post secondary technical education..." (p. 443).
>
> "instruction should be organized around a broader occupational structure, and the emphasis on academic and workplace literacy skills and content should be increased."
>
> "Perhaps the fundamental issue in reforming the voc ed curriculum boils down to a question of depth versus breadth."

The Re-focusing of Occ Ed is occurring in different degrees in many areas of the state. Currently there is greater articulation with post secondary institutions than ever before. One example is the Tech Prep Project of Onondaga Community College with a consortium of schools: LaFayette, Liverpool, Onondaga/Cortland/Madison BOCES, Oswego BOCES, Syracuse City and West Genesee. Three Health, Technologies and Business areas have been articulated, thereby allowing successful students to gain college credit for work completed during high school years.

When the Commission of America's Choice calls for Youth Centers and Combined Work and Study and College Programs, I know that the 41 BOCES in New York State can deliver the programs because they are already in place. My first recommendation then is to develop and refine what is already in place in most BOCES: alternative education, occ ed, work study and adult education programs. We should not accept the Commission's recommendation to create Employment and Training Boards and yet another bureaucracy in New York State that would devour already scarce resources.

My second recommendation is to have each region combine advisory boards, councils and networks, such as Private Industry Council, Job Training Partnership Act committees, economic development councils and centers, Service Area Planning Council into one business/education council. It should include, as recommended by the Commission, "Company, union and local officials as well as representatives of community-based organizations." This group would be voluntary, and advise the BOCES as the local education lead agency.

Once the advisory councils are in place and new expectations and standards set for the BOCES, then the action must begin, and all players held accountable. To assist the change agents at the local level, the Statewide Steering Committee, which has been convened since June 1989 by the New York State Council on Vocational Education or a new committee, should continue the process of collecting and analyzing data on current student performance, and begin to set the course for expected student performance. Statements of educational outcomes would be constructed and implemented in order to drive the development of curricula at the local level. A May 1991 report of the Commission for Occupational Education Excellence convened by the Steuben-Allegany BOCES calls for their BOCES to "involve business and industry in curricula development, teaching and assessment to the maximum extent possible." This effort and goal should be replicated in each BOCES.

My third recommendation is to respectfully request that our Commissioner of Education initiate an additional compact that bridges the various departments in state government with the education community. An agreement must be developed among the various commissioners in New York State: Agriculture & Markets, Correctional Services, Economic Development, Education, Labor, Social Services, etc. to agree on a unified focus for education and the use of the available human resources that exist in our agencies. Part of the compact would be the waiver of rules and regulations that become barriers to working together in developing programs that compliment each other for the benefit of students and families.

My fourth and last recommendation is that any statewide advisory council that is formed include senior administrative representatives from companies that are not only active in New York State, but also have a national and international market. If we are to become current with business expectations beyond the immediate future, we need to involve advisors who not only have a futuristic vision, but those who possess the experience of the international marketplace. Such councils would not be convened for a single purpose and issue yet another report, but would have a continuing agenda of setting expected student outcomes and evaluating our progress.

America's Choice places the responsibility for the improvement in our work places not only on the education institutions that prepare workers for initial employment, but also on the businesses to continue to educate workers to develop new skills, re-orient attitudes and in the use of technology. BOCES has a role in these recommendations also.

I have focused on what I consider the initial steps that must be taken for effective change to take place if our graduates from secondary schools are to be successful.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today on my views concerning America's Choice regarding the future of education which should lead to increased productivity and prosperity and a new dignity for our students as they leave the classroom and prepare to make a meaningful contribution to themselves and to society.